

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Nikolay Kirilov Mihaylov, member of the scientific jury for conferment the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"/PhD in the professional field of Philosophy 2.3 for the dissertation work of PhD student Mr. Martin Smith on the topic: "Certainty in Uncertainty: The Value of Stoic Virtue Ethics"

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The dissertation submitted for review is structured in an Introduction, three chapters, Conclusion, appendixes and bibliography, which are developed on 210 pages. The bibliography includes a significant number of sources in English - printed publications, without online sources, which is rare in today's digitalized world and speaks of the candidate's commendable attention to books and reading. The dissertation text is supplemented with additional tables, figures and additions, which further systematize the ideas and contributions of the study. At the very beginning, I would like to note the good structure of the dissertation, which brings additional clarity to the thesis and arguments of the PhD student in the complex and difficult topic of his research. The PhD student has also submitted three articles on the topic according to the requirements. They are in English and are intended for publication in scientific periodicals. The abstract (Абстракт) is also properly formatted, perhaps the translation needs improvement, but it still conveys the idea of the structure of the study, its main emphases and conclusions. It is presented in two languages according to the requirements, the presentation is analytical and, although with some already mentioned notes, meets the requirements for referencing a dissertation work. The documentation for the defense itself is complete and the PhD student has provided all the references required by law.

The work presented by the candidate is distinguished by a broad philosophical and in-depth scientific view of problems in the field of ethics, the history of philosophy, aesthetics, metaphysics, the philosophy of religion and religious philosophy. The entire work sets itself an ambitious task, especially in the field of ethics – “to craft a novel virtue ethics” (p. 1 of the dissertation). And further – “This study proposes that philosophy be affirmed through its striving for continuous improvement” (p. 1 of the Abstract). By its nature, the doctoral candidate’s research is undoubtedly philosophical in nature, in which he skillfully combines his knowledge from different fields of philosophical knowledge without losing sight of the main

focus of his text – ethical issues in its complex perspective of development and morality¹ as the basis of human existence and realization.

Thus, the topic of the dissertation is formulated and developed in a relatively little-researched area of academic studies in philosophy and ethics in our country, as the approach proposed by the PhD student - critical analysis - is relevant to the scientific tasks he sets himself. The dissertation examines three main conceptual ethical schemes in the history of moral philosophy, tracing their dynamics and influence in a contemporary moral context (through an analysis of Heidegger and Arendt) - those of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Stoic philosophy, the latter being the main semantic and conceptual center of the study. The author assumes that "the problems of humanity remain generally the same throughout all eras" and this reveals the need for establishment of a contemporary ethics of virtues. I believe that the approach of Mr. Smith is well-reasoned and is the basis for formulating disputable theses that he can successfully defend in the course of his research.

The first chapter of the dissertation is devoted to an analysis of the main research problem. The author takes as the main motive for his research one of his own observations on the phenomenon of manufactured dependency (p. 4 of the dissertation), which in the Abstract (Абстракт) is presented in Bulgarian as "artificially created dependency" (p. 4). The main research idea here is how the content of the fundamental ethical concepts – good, evil, justice – changes and how they make sense in contemporary theories of the philosophy of morality, as well as what are their manifestations in real moral practice. The author's observations are rather negative in tone, as the reason for this peculiar "declinism"² he seeks in "religion's (and religious- N.M.) decline in the West" (p. 5 of the dissertation). The style and language used by the author, at least in my opinion, are essayistic in places, with a certain ambiguity of the concepts used, but from a careful reading it becomes clear that in his opinion the "normalization of evil" (ibid.) in the modern world leads to an overturning of the moral order in society and this requires special attention and precise analysis of the conceptual apparatus with which ethical theory operates. In this part, the PhD student's reasoning refers to the fundamental part of the philosophy of morality – the one that describes and explains the content of the main moral categories. The author searches for trends in Western ethical thought for the definition of evil, starting with its definition in the representatives of the Athenian school of eudemonism. But also in this chapter

¹ „Morality concerns this study—the means by which existence is maintained at the most fundamental degree “, p. 1. Dissertation

² „given this metaphysic and its bias toward destruction, if this human intervention instead pursues destruction, we observe death flourishes beyond measure“ (p. 8 Dissertation).

the PhD student moves on to an analysis of the category *das Man*, trying to expand the content of Heidegger's concept – an ambitious but achievable task in the specific ethical context of the study.

The author's interest is directed towards making sense of objects that at first glance have no moral semantics – "meaning in nature, life or death are not defined as objects that are morally good or bad" (p. 11 of the Dissertation). At the same time, the candidate, in my opinion, successfully sets a new context for the analysis of the concept of the German philosopher, fully consistent with the main purpose of his work and also from the positions of the philosophy of morality. Moreover, through an original comparison with Aristotle's eudemonistic ethics. Heidegger's philosophy in this sense is not optimistic and I would say that this lack of optimism in the mode of moral consciousness and behavior is also shared by the student – Mr. Smith ("where right is that which and where feels best is that which accords with consensus emotion", p. 19, a quote that seems to speak of an anonymity in our social presence and moral identity, as well as, according to the author, "lack of moral conscience in the majority"). The author's main research position is about evil as a proactive, existent object (p. 184 of the dissertation), with which he seems to criticize the Aristotelian (and to a large extent ancient, and not only) thesis about evil as a shortage, lack, absence, imperfection. The exposition of this main part is relatively complicatedly explained, in places verbose, with a number of additional explanations. And that is why I support and highly appreciate the appendices to the dissertation text, which make the author's theses far more transparent and demonstrate the author's ability to navigate the complex dynamics of philosophical and ethical concepts (in this case – p. 184 of the dissertation). In this regard, it is difficult for me to explain the presence in the text of an obscure figure like the former Soviet citizen Yuri Bezmenov and his largely conspiratorial statements, which are outside the academic and ethical discourse, as an argument for the philosophical basis of the work and the author's complex conceptual figures and complicated conclusions. Moreover, Bezmenov, in his active, mostly media presence, speaks about the model of a "new order" (?), a "hidden influence" on the part of the former USSR (of "Soviet tyranny", as he himself expresses it), and contrasts it with the ideal (in his opinion) Western model, and it does not seem to me appropriate to generalize based on these statements about society as a whole. But overall, the chapter makes a strong impression of an extremely detailed and even comprehensive examination of the problems of ethical theory and the influence of the (utopian?) ideals formulated by it on moral reality, which sometimes requires these ideals to be "supported" by force.

The second chapter of the dissertation tries to offer the author's solutions to the problems posed and analyzed earlier. The author tries to offer a "metaphysic that comprises both good and evil" (p. 51 of the dissertation). Perhaps some analogies from the world of nature that Mr. Smith uses in this part to argue this statement do not seem to me to be entirely convincing. As far as I remember, Plato also argued in *Theaetetus* that evil cannot be completely eliminated, because there must always be something opposite to Good. Moreover, according to Plato, it "wanders in mortal nature", i.e. it is inherent in the created, not the divine. And I would also not unequivocally accept Mr. Smith's statement that Aristotle "denies evil". Rather, the pursuit of happiness (eudaimonia, Good - what we desire for its own sake) in people is for him an obviousness, an axiom that lies at the basis of the explanation of human behavior, including in communication. But I hasten to state right away that Mr. Smith has presented extremely detailed and convincing evidence for his main thesis, which reveals his very serious philosophical and research erudition. This is proven by the critical examination of Aristotelian philosophy, as well as by the entire text of the dissertation research, by the author's obvious excellent knowledge of ideas, concepts, notions, as well as by his ability to analyze and propose his own, original theories and solutions. But also by Mr. Smith's moral commitment to propose a new ethical theory, tailored to the complex social environment, based on his own knowledge and observations - "virtue should not serve an abstract ideal, but [be] rather a standard against which life is improved and suffering is reduced." (p. 19 of the Abstract). That is why the author's intention is to formulate an ethics that would base its practical significance on a world that, according to him, is uncertain and unpredictable, with the actual presence of good, but also of evil – "In response this study proposes a virtue ethics, one that pursues a practical approach over the theoretical." (p. 90 of the dissertation). The study focuses on an analysis of the Stoic ethical system and the virtues formulated by it, which is also the center of the general academic intention. What is interesting to me in this chapter is the choice of Mr. Smith – an analysis of the ideas of Niccolò Machiavelli, better known as an advocate of a manipulative and amoral approach to politics and political actions and from whom the assessment "Machiavellian" has remained³. The PhD student analyzes the Machiavellian ethical doctrine, looking for a connection with his main scientific thesis. Aristotelian and Machiavellian ideas are in contrast with Stoic ones in terms of substantiating moral consciousness and behavior according to him - Stoicism offers its own ideals, it as a moral doctrine remains "subordinate" to the conditions of reality. Which for me is an original and independent approach, since it is assumed that

³ "we find Machiavelli's name synonymous with evil" (p. 92 of the dissertation). Let us not hesitate [in politics] to turn to evil if necessary, I quote Machiavelli by memory.

Aristotle and Machiavelli are in opposite positions - the first sees in politics a continuation and even the highest manifestation of morality, and the second - that politics has its own logic and rules that are distinct from moral ones. However, it is obvious from the presentation that its author knows the subject matter and theses of the analyzed philosophers very well and handles them extremely skillfully.

The third chapter makes a strong impression with the expansion of the author's analysis of fundamental ethical concepts. Their explanations from the point of view of religious moral doctrine are also included. The author reaches interesting metaphysical reflections on the nature of reality and the object, again in support of his thesis about the substantiality of good and evil. Also very impressive is the comparison of the concept of "virtue" in different philosophies of morality - Aristotle, the Stoics and Machiavelli (the Stoics presenting a pragmatic guide for living life well). The author argues his preference for the Stoic explanation of virtue compared to Aristotle's on the basis that for the Stoics it is the "sole criterion"⁴ for a life worth living. As a conclusion to the overall presentation, Mr. Smith argues a more sustainable and adaptive ethics of virtues, which would preserve the subject (the moral agent) amidst increasing moral problems and their destructive impact on society.

The conclusion is a logical deduction to the whole dissertation text. The author considers Stoicism as "the most suitable response to societal moral decline" (p. 136 of the dissertation). In my opinion, the contributions of the dissertation are that Mr. Smith offers convincing arguments for the presence of a moral-ethical dimension in the philosophical positions of authors who seem to be very well known to the college, but he finds new important aspects in them, as well as in the successful connection of this dimension with a practical and humane position for indicating tendencies for a moral choice in the complex and very often alarming situations that the modern world offers us. The author Mr. Smith demonstrates deep knowledge of the object of research, analytical nature of his reasoning and broad knowledge in various scientific fields, not only the philosophy of morality, but also in aesthetics, politics, social philosophy, history. From this perspective, the presented dissertation is extremely promising as a basis for future work not only of its author Mr. Smith, but also as a valuable work in the field of current and interesting issues related to the understanding of morality and its change in contemporary conditions. The PhD student clearly proves his skills to analyze and approach problems philosophically, to propose his own reasoned solutions to complex ethical issues, to

⁴ This conclusion is preceded by a very serious and detailed comparative analysis of the various ethical concepts with an emphasis on Stoicism, which is an indicator of the author's extremely high erudition.

defend his own concepts with arguments and not to accept “ready-made” or conventional solutions among the variety of schools, concepts and theories. The study is distinguished both by a pronounced layer of fundamentality – analysis and reasoning on basic ethical-philosophical concepts, and by practical aspects – ensuring, as far as possible, well-being in a philosophical and psychological (through moral feelings) plan, of self-realization in the modern complicated social situation (“this study offers a certain practical and therapeutic potential”, p. 36 of the Abstract). Last but not least, I notice a truly moral pathos (despite the stoic apathy) in Mr. Smith for a truly meaningful and real moral support of the individual in times of difficulties and trials, which today's reality very often offers us. I accept as complete and original the scientific contributions (Principal contributions) that Mr. Smith has consistently and reasonably presented at the end of his work.

Based on all of the above, I highly evaluate the work of the PhD student Mr. Martin Smith "*Certainty in Uncertainty: The Value of Stoic Virtue Ethics*" **and will vote with conviction support to confer** the scientific and educational degree of "Doctor of Philosophy"/PhD to Mr. Martin Smith.

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